



## VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK

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# *Solidarity Not Charity*

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*“Common Ground restores hope and teaches civic responsibility”*

Malik Rahim, Co-founder

# Introduction

The **Common Ground Collective**, (CGC) thanks you in advance for taking time out of your lives to come to the Gulf Coast region to contribute your skills and resources toward the relief and rebuilding effort.

Volunteers play a central role in Common Ground's work. This handbook will explain Common Ground's mission, history, programs, as well as health and safety info and the kinds of work that volunteers undertake.

Please make sure you have checked in with the volunteer team to sign a waiver and make sure we have emergency contact information.

The hurricanes and flooding of 2005 devastated much of the city. These catastrophic events exposed long-standing injustices faced by residents of the lower-income communities of color, such as police harassment and brutality, limited or non-existent health and other services, and under-investment in public infrastructure, such as the levees. It is critical that the immediate needs of the communities are met while long-term strategies to address these problems and stabilize the community are initiated.

## Mission and Vision:

Common Ground's mission is to provide short-term relief for victims of hurricane disasters in the Gulf Coast region, and long-term support in rebuilding the communities affected in the New Orleans area.

We are a community-initiated volunteer organization offering assistance, mutual aid and support. The work gives hope to communities by working with them, providing for their immediate needs and emphasizing people working together to rebuild their lives in sustainable ways.

## Organizational History

Common Ground Collective was founded by on September 5, 2005, just days after Hurricane

Katrina swept through the Gulf Coast. Malik Rahim, long-term community organizer, member of the Black Panther Party and Green Party Candidate for New Orleans City Council, put out a call for support as white vigilantes patrolled the streets. Two friends from Austin heeded the call, and came to protect Malik's home in Algiers. Sitting around the kitchen Malik, his partner Sharon and Scott Crow from Austin, looked at the devastation around them, and put out a call for more help. With \$50 among them, Common Ground was born.

While floodwaters from broken levees still flowed in the streets, street medics from around the country began to arrive and opened the first emergency clinic after the hurricane on September 9<sup>th</sup>. This was quickly followed by an emergency distribution and aid center at Malik's house.

As the magnitude of the disaster became clear and the call for help grew louder, more and more people began to converge. It was immediately clear that the government and official relief organizations were abandoning thousands of individuals and families, and CGC knew it was time to step in.



## The Collective Today

Since September 2005, Common Ground has grown to over 70 fulltime unpaid organizers, an average of 150 –300 volunteers on the ground at any given time and a network of over 8000 volunteers. Since it's inception we have served close to 70,000 residents in 7 parishes.

A recent volunteer, who left the Red Cross out of frustration and joined Common Ground, recently described CGC as follows in an article he wrote for the Coalition on Homelessness:

*“Common Ground can boast one of the most multidisciplinary of all teams. There are (categories not mutually exclusive) nurses, doctors, psychiatrists, pharmacists, anarchists, herbalists, acupuncturists, community organizers, journalists, legal representatives, aid workers, proletarian neighborhood members, EMT's, squatters, gutter punks, artists, mechanics, chiropractors, clergy,*

*and so forth involved. A huge sign outside the door reads, “Solidarity Not Charity” and this statement exemplifies the perspective of those involved.”*

James Chionsini, Common Ground volunteer

Common Ground is not just about our “titles” or labels; we are made up of young and old, many races, genders and classes. We have different educational background and cultures. Common Ground is an incredible intersection of identities, talents and commitments that has been able to establish a holistic approach to our relief and community stabilization efforts. We are here to serve everybody – no one is turned away! A more thorough description of these programs is in the back of this manual.

Common Ground is pursuing a three-phase, long-term strategy. First is the relief effort, second is the creation of workers cooperatives to develop economic engines to provide good paying jobs and the third phase --Rebuild Green will develop a model for homes using permaculture alternatives and sustainable design.

Common Ground is a non-profit (501.C 3) organization through our fiscal sponsor Community Futures Collective. We are funded by the generous contributions of individuals along with public and private sector donations and grants. Supplies have also been provided by faith-based organizations, relief groups and businesses offering medical supplies, cleaning equipment, computers, wireless Internet services, clothing, personal hygiene products and a host of items identified on Common Ground's online "Wish List." Our fund raising efforts are largely generated from our web site at [www.commongroundrelief.org](http://www.commongroundrelief.org). Common Ground currently employs no paid staff; even administrative and organizational support, is volunteer based.

The Collective is accountable to Malik Rahim, who is the main visionary behind the project and one of the affected community members in the region.

There is a group of coordinators and organizers that anchor different



projects, which meet twice a week to share information, work on operational priorities, make strategic decisions and do overall problem solving.

Most volunteers are here for short periods of time and it is not realistic for so many to be involved in the decision-making process overall, but your feedback and ideas are greatly appreciated.

For volunteers we hold daily meetings, which cover updates and work assignments. In the evenings we hold periodic all volunteer meetings for feedback as well as trainings and cultural performances.

Many people ask how they can become more involved in the Collective. According to Malik Rahim, it requires a long-term commitment and demonstrated responsibility and action. At Common Ground, trust is built on what you do, not what you say! We also ask that you do not start anything that you cannot finish!

Common Ground is in it for the long haul. Some believe our presence in New Orleans is perpetuating racism. Others, however, see us as a new generation of Freedom Riders where white activists traveled south to overturn Jim Crow laws of illegal segregation practices. Whatever the perspective is it clear our work is making a concrete and positive difference in people's lives.

Common Ground is working consciously to use the privilege we have either because of the color of our skin, our class, our education or age, to garner resources and skills, to support as many communities as we can to come back home and rebuild. Common Ground is not assuming leadership or decision-making power in this city, but instead focuses on the front line work of clean up, relief and defense against police harassment and evictions and what we see is the largest gentrification project in US history. Everything we are witnessing are clear efforts to prevent the Black community from returning home.

We work hard to include an anti-racist analysis and practice in our work with the goal of helping hundreds of volunteers see the destructiveness of racism first hand and deepen their understanding of how pervasive and destructive it is.

We hope that in your time here you will listen, learn and work with respect to insure that historically neglected communities in the Gulf Coast region are able to come home to build a more just and sustainable future and that you will go home with a and work to become a strong anti-racist ally in your own community.

## Racism in Louisiana

New Orleans is one of the oldest, grandest cities in North America. Its culture is unique, its architecture, music, and food are some of the finest in the world. It is a beautiful city.

But this beauty conceals serious, deeply rooted problems, which New Orleans is still dealing with. Racism in the city has strong roots in slavery, poverty and oppression, and is still visible today. Many community leaders and others believe that the Government's inexcusable handling of the days and weeks after Katrina hit reflected racism at work. African-American residents of the city have always had less access to health care, quality schools, good-paying jobs, safe neighborhoods, and financial resources than their white neighbors and the post-Katrina relief efforts mirror the same pattern. Over the centuries, African-Americans in New Orleans have suffered disproportionately at the hands of law enforcement, white mobs, and a corrupt city bureaucracy.

We must be aware that we are strangers in this community. While we are here to serve the needs of predominantly African-American and Native American, Asian and Cajun low-income communities, we must understand that our cultural experiences and expectations may differ. It is crucial that volunteers honor wishes and needs of those we are working with. We can do that best by listening and acting with humility and respect. We are here to provide information, resources and skills to residents who are trying to rebuild their communities and their lives, but it is the residents who will determine their future.

The history of race and poverty in New Orleans is complex. Being a port city, dozens of racial and ethnic groups have passed through, most have settled down here at some point. The racial makeup

of the city is diverse, as is the religious and ethnic composition. People have done business with and worked alongside others from different backgrounds, and many daughters and sons from one ethnic or racial group have married the daughters and sons from another. Not all blacks were slaves, not all whites were in the Klan, but regardless of race, all people have had to deal with white supremacy, racial and class violence, and economic and political disempowerment.

Black New Orleanians have had to deal with issues specific to their communities, more so than most whites. Historically black communities have been victimized for generations by City Hall, the police, ruthless landlords, and street-level violent and non-violent crime. Citizens have been neglected and disrespected by social services agencies, cut out of assistance programs, underemployed and underpaid.

The residents and their families will be here long after we are gone. *As a volunteer collective supporting them, we must listen to their voices, respond to their needs, and defer to their wishes, in order to work with them in true solidarity.*

## Brief History of Louisiana

There is a rich diversity of peoples in Louisiana. They include the original Native American inhabitants, plus the descendants of a variety of settlers, among who were the French, Spanish, English, German, Acadians, West Indians, Africans, Irish and Italians and now include now almost every nationality on earth.

The Spanish and Acadians soon joined the original French colonists, and later by French aristocrats fleeing slave revolts in the West Indies or the horrors of the French Revolution. As part of Louisiana's French legacy counties are called "parishes" and the Napoleonic Code (rather than Common Law) holds sway in the state's courtrooms.

Ironically, it was the Spanish who built many of the colonial structures that still stand in the "French Quarter" of New Orleans, and Spanish is still spoken in some communities, particularly in St.

Bernard Parish below New Orleans. The French Company of the West recruited hundreds of German families in 1719, and those sturdy pioneers settled upriver from New Orleans along a section of the Mississippi River that is still called the Cote des Allemands ("German Coast"). The parishes north of Lake Pontchartrain (the sixth largest lake in the U.S.) and east of the Mississippi River were once a part of British West Florida, occupied by English planters and military in the 1700s. Bernardo de Galvez, Louisiana's Spanish governor and an American ally in the Revolution prevented the further development of a British stronghold in the Mississippi Valley by capturing British forts at Manchac and Baton Rouge in 1779.

Some years later, in 1810, citizens of the "Florida Parishes" staged the West Florida Rebellion against Spanish authority in the region. They established the West Florida Republic, which enjoyed independence briefly before joining the American territory that had been acquired from France through the Louisiana Purchase of 1803.

Among the other nationalities that have settled in Louisiana are the Yugoslavians who made a success of oyster harvesting along the Gulf Coast and the Hungarians who became cultivators of strawberries and other crops in the Albany area. Free blacks amassed some of Louisiana's largest land holdings prior to the Civil War. Blacks invented jazz and made major contributions to Louisiana cuisine in particular. And many of Louisiana's annual festivals are celebrations of particular ethnic contributions to the "cultural gumbo" of this unique state.

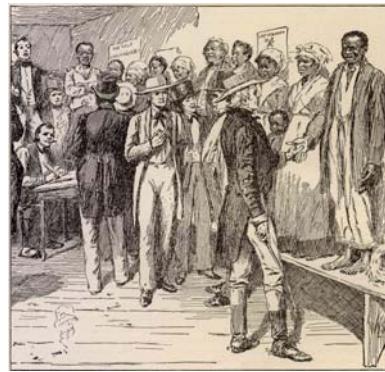
## Slavery in Louisiana

By 1850 New Orleans was the South's largest slave-trading center. At that time there were twenty-five major slave depots within a half-mile from the St. Charles Hotel where slaves could be bought and sold. Most slaves were sold at public auction rather than in private transactions.

Most of the slaves traded in New Orleans came from other states, particularly from the Atlantic seaboard. In 1804 the federal government outlawed the external slave trade in Louisiana, and the United

States Constitution forbade the importation of slaves after January 1808.

Traders smuggled slaves into Louisiana by way of the state's many bayous and swamps. Rising slave prices in the 1850s produced an increase in this illicit traffic and prompted some white southerners, including many from Louisiana, to petition the federal government for repeal of the African slave trade ban. This petition was unsuccessful.



**Slave Auction in New Orleans**

Slaves resented being sold as property with very little control over their well-being and that of their children. They tried to persuade masters and traders from selling them away from family members and familiar settings, though sellers generally ignored family ties. Others injured themselves or pretended to do so in order to lower their monetary value. Some even committed suicide rather than face a new master and work regimen.

Slaves occasionally engineered mutinies aboard ships while they were transported from the Atlantic coast to Louisiana. One of the most famous mutinies took place on board the *Creole* in 1841, when slaves took over the ship on its way from Virginia to Louisiana and headed for the Bahamas, a British commonwealth that had abolished slavery in the 1830s. Over the protest of American authorities, the British granted freedom to all slaves aboard the *Creole* when it arrived in Nassau. This is just one examples of many slave revolts across the region.

## **Overview of New Orleans**

New Orleans is located on the Mississippi River. Most of the city is situated on the east bank, between the river and Lake Pontchartrain to the north. Because it was built on a great turn of the river, it is known as the Crescent City. New Orleans, with a pre-Katrina population of close to

half a million people is the largest city in Louisiana and one of the principal cities of the South. It was established on the high ground nearest the mouth of the Mississippi, which is 177 km (110 mi) downstream. Elevations range from 3.65 m (12 ft) above sea level to 2 m (6.5 ft) below; as a result, a system of water pumps, drainage canals, and levees has been built to protect the city from flooding, but we know now that the existing system has proven inadequate.

New Orleans experiences mild winters and hot, humid summers. Temperatures in January average 13 deg C (55 deg F), and in July they average 28 deg C (82 deg F). Annual rainfall is 1,448 mm (57 in).

The population of New Orleans, including Native Americans, French, Blacks, Italians, Irish, Spanish, Anglos, and Cubans, reflects its cosmopolitan past. The Cajuns or Acadians, are descendants of French émigrés expelled from Nova Scotia (or Acadia) during the 18th century. They speak their own French dialect.

Historically the port has been one of the world's largest and has ranked first in the United States in tonnage handled. Traditionally, major exports are petroleum products, grain, cotton, paper, machinery, and iron and steel. The city's economy has been dominated by the petrochemical, aluminum, and food processing industries and by tourism.

New Orleans is noted for its fine restaurants, for its Dixieland jazz, and for its numerous cultural and educational facilities. Tulane (1829), Dillard (1869), and Loyola (1849) universities are major institutions of higher learning. The French Quarter, or Vieux Carre (French for "old square"), is the site of the original city and contains many of the historic and architecturally significant buildings for which New Orleans is famous.

The most important and profitable annual tourist event is Mardi gras, which is celebrated for a week before the start of Lent. . There is now serious concern by many residents that it is inappropriate for the city to put large sums of money and energy into this celebration when there are so many critical needs.

Recently hotels have attempted to evict evacuees staying in these hotels to make room for Mardi Gras tourist. Thanks to the work of Common Ground and a tireless and first-rate legal team, those evictions are being temporarily halted.

Below are some statistics that help convey the seriousness of the situation in the region.

## Facts About New Orleans as of Feb. 2006

- Still finding bodies. Death toll in LA is 1,577.
- Suicides are up – double the national avg.
- 300,000 residents fled.
- 284,000 homes destroyed.
- 71,000 businesses shut down.
- Tens of thousands of trees toppled.
- Only 2000 or 6% of the 30,000 FEMA trailers requested have been delivered
- Only ¼ of the 3,400 restaurants are open.
- Only about 60,000 sleep in the city – out of ½ million.
- Of the city's 8 hospitals, only 2 are open, serving a population that swells to 150,000 during the day. Fewer than 15% of the doctors are back.
- Of 120 schools only 25 are open.
- Many areas are still without electricity, water, gas and mail service.
- New Orleans is bringing in about a ¼ of its usual income of \$450 million
- Losses in tourism are estimated to be \$1.5 million a day.
- Port is partially open – estimated \$100 million in damage, and port-dependant business lost close to another \$300 million.
- 30% of the port no longer exists.

# The Work We Are Doing...

We have served residents in 7 parishes (politically similar to counties) and are supporting operations in Orleans Parish, Plaquemines Parish and Terrebonne Parish. We operate distribution centers in most of these that need to be staffed daily. Below is a brief description of some of these areas, followed by a section on how we organize the work.

## **Algiers:**

Common Ground began in Algiers with a free medical clinic, emergency home support effort, a media lab and a distribution center that was closed in Dec. Since then the Clinic has evolved into an independent allied organization, the Kids and Community Project offered an after school program with Berhman School and the work of media lab, special events, speaking engagements, meetings and more continue out of Malik's home.

Recently our vision of the third phase of building a sustainable community has expanded in the Woodland Apartments where we have secured management rights to a 361-unit apartment complex on 13 acres. With a strong Tenant Association setting the plan, the residents are building a safe community--rents have been reduced, clean up and repairs begun, workers cooperatives, the community center, kids program, community garden and computer lab with free classes are underway.

## **9th Ward Cleanup and Advocacy:**

The 9th Ward has gained international media attention due to the severity of the flooding and the exposure of long-standing human rights violations and neglect the residents have endured. Common Ground's work in the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward is critical to preserve long-standing African-American neighborhoods, which are under threat as never before. Damage in the 9th Ward is severe because of the proximity to the broken levee, and the fact that it was flooded twice following both hurricanes, Katrina and Rita. But despite widespread devastation, many residents are committed to return to their homes. The Upper 9<sup>th</sup> Ward is coming home. More and more people are returning and our distribution efforts and house gutting support have been critical to this return. We

have already moved into our third distribution site, with the first one now operating as a day care center and the Pauline St. site has now been restored as a church, with a kids program and the community center restoration is underway.

In the **Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward**, devastated by the levee break, the community must fight to survive. Common Ground has set up a protection plan to insure homes are not bulldozed without consent. Since January, we have opened a distribution center, temporary resident housing, a community kitchen, and a media lab. We continue gutting residents homes and are bioremediating numerous sites. A new health clinic is opening in July 2006. Access to housing, clean water and electricity are still a struggle.

## **Dulac Community Center, Terrabone Parish:**

While city streets were still flooded from Katrina, Hurricane Rita swept ashore on the Louisiana coast last year. Among those communities devastated by her impact were the small Houma Indian settlements in Houma, Dulac, and Point-Aux Chenes. The population of these Indian settlements, some 3500 tribal members, was hit hard by the storm. Over one thousand of that number were left homeless, their homes completely destroyed by wind and water. In addition to making regular deliveries to the Bayou since Hurricane Rita, Common Ground now supports a full-time Distribution Center in Dulac that provides a children's free breakfast program, a community center and supplies and clean up/repair work for residents. Community members are actively involved in running the center

## **Mid City**

Common Ground began working out of Mid City in February by establishing a volunteer base at the ArtEgg Warehouse off of Broad and Earhardt. Our work helped to clean and restore the building for art studios, a large permaculture garden, offices for the Alliance for Sustainable Energy and green building vendors. We cleaned numerous other homes and buildings in the area.

With our work complete, our new volunteer site is at the Iberville Warehouse. (2323 Iberville St. one

block east of Canal, between Galvez and Broad St.) Our work includes cleaning out schools, supporting the opening of a Community Recreational Center, and a bioremediation project cleaning up pesticides from the Thompson Hayward Pesticide Plan in Gert Town.

### **Plaquemine's and St. Bernard Parish:**

Plaquemines is Louisiana's southernmost parish where the great Mississippi River meets the Gulf of Mexico. The parish is a region of ecological wonder with its many waterways, fishing and hunting grounds. Hurricane Katrina devastated this Parish; most of the homes and city infrastructure were destroyed. Volunteer crews have gutted and cleaned several churches, a number of homes and cleared an area that can hold 350 trailers in the town of Phoenix working with Rev. Tyrone Edwards of the Zion Travelers Baptist Church (also a trainer with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond.) The Church celebrated its grand opening on June 16<sup>th</sup> and operates it's own distribution center.

In St. Bernard Parish, Project Hope on East Judge Perez Blvd was initiated by Common Ground organizers. This volunteer site and distribution center continues to serve the communities around Violet in the lower east end of the parish.

### **Work Crews:**

Every morning, Common Ground volunteers assemble after breakfast to hear announcements and to sign up for work crews. Once the crews are assigned you need to get the necessary protective equipment and tools and roll out as quickly as possible. Work areas include:

#### **Home Clean Up and Gutting:** This is a crucial



part of Common Ground's mission to support returning residents. We send work crews into the communities to help residents make their homes, churches and community centers livable again. This can involve removing furniture, heavy appliances, personal

items, and trash, and it often requires gutting a building entirely – removing moldy sheetrock, carpets, insulation and more.

**Mold Abatement:** After the gutting the process of cleaning out the mold begins. Common Ground has been encouraging the use of EM – Efficient Microbes as an alternative to bleach. Mold abatement includes scrubbing down the inside of the space, often several times. Mold work is not a standard part of our work. If you are doing mold work make sure you have the information needed, proper tools and safety equipment.

**Debris Removal and Storm Drain Cleaning –** This is outside work bagging trash and brush to clean neighborhood streets, parks and drains. Always wear gloves and respirators when doing this work. You never know what might be in the trash,

**Eviction Defense and Legal Work –** Unscrupulous landlords have taken advantage of the post-Katrina housing scarcity to impose higher rents, and many are evicting tenants illegally and without due process. The anti-eviction team helped found NO HEAT (the New Orleans Housing Emergency Action Team) and other groups to combat this, using public information campaigns and direct action to stop the evictions and open public housing. The team also helps document police abuse, organizes legal clinics and provides information and support.

**Bio-remediation and Gardening –** Common Ground volunteers have worked to restore community gardens and are using natural methods to clean toxins in the soil.

**General Common Ground Support –** Also needed are computer techs, folks with organizing, media or office skills, car and bike mechanics, writers, cooks, grant writers, trainers, radio support, people to staff the Women's Center, child care programs and more. Every day, food has to be prepared, sweeping and mopping done, the construction projects need a hand, signs and stencils need to be made, leaflets distributed and errands run.

*Thank you in advance for all your work! Together we will provide hope and teach civic responsibility as we work with residents to reclaim and restore their communities*

## Daily Schedule

Every day at Common Ground is different. Unexpected things happen so we must be flexible and willing to help in any way we can. Our basic schedule makes it possible for work crews to get what they need and get to work sites quickly.

### 6:00am      **Wake Up and Breakfast:**

Please get up and get breakfast. There's work to be done.

### 6:45      **Morning Check In**

### 7:00 am      **Work crews leave from there:**

Join a crew if you are not on one. Get necessary supplies and equipment and hit the streets.

### 12:30 pm      **Lunch:** Meals are usually brought to the worksites. Make sure the necessary info gets to the kitchen before you leave or you may not get fed! Bring water!

### 3-4 pm      **Crews come back to decontaminate:** Each work crewmember is responsible for cleaning her or his own gear. Scrub boot covers, gloves, tools, and contaminated equipment thoroughly in the decontamination area. Wash your hands, take a shower if you need, and change clothes if dirty.

### 6:30 pm      **Dinner:** Evening meal is prepared at the Community Center. Be patient if the food is late, it is always worth the wait.

### 7:30 pm      **Evening Meetings** and programs, race and gender caucuses, films and more.



## Communal Living

Common Ground is only able to offer basic facilities for our volunteers. The numbers fluctuate and there are times when we are living in extremely tight quarters. We need everyone's help to make this work. Some tips and agreements include:

- Respect other's personal space and possessions!
- Be conscious of your own boundaries and needs and communicate clearly and openly about them. If you are feeling uncomfortable about anything please let one of the organizers know.
- Keep your personal items stowed away during the day, and respect the personal property of your fellow volunteers. This includes toiletries.
- Keep voices down after 9:30 pm, so that your neighbors can sleep. Lights go off at 11:00.
- Flashlights are handy to keep around, as the electricity is not consistent.
- No cigarette smoking inside, and please stay to the edges if you are smoking during a group meeting.
- The Center and our worksites are drug, alcohol and weapon free spaces.
- Help out - clean up after yourself, take a security shift, sign up for dishwashing or food prep, pick up trash etc.
- Conflict Mediation – a team is available for

## Working with Respect

Our backgrounds have not given many of us the tools to build just and sustainable society, so we have to recognize, learn from, and work with each other to build these visions and practices.

These points provide us a starting place to work from, learning respect and trust to build stronger relationships and organization.

- Everyone has a piece of the truth
- Everyone can learn
- Everyone can teach or share something.

- Remember all of this a process. What happens along the way is as important as the goals.
- Respect the work and abilities of others
- Create safe and inclusive environments for all.
- Take risks within yourself: Participate, give it a chance; have some trust to try on new ideas.
- Critique inappropriate behaviors NOT the person. Remember, we are ALL still learning.
- Actively listen to each other: listen to what others are saying, before speaking.
- Be accountable to the people and communities we support and yourself.
- Speak only for yourself. Remember we all have different experiences and values to share.
- Step up, Step back: Give space for MANY voices to be heard.
- Avoid defensiveness: Be open to legitimate critique or challenges of ideas, patterns or behaviors.
- Mistakes will be made by all of us. None of us is perfect.
- Be aware of the effects of your actions on the communities and others around you.
- Challenge oppressive behavior in a way that helps people grow
- Take cues from people in the communities you are working with in the way you interact
- If you see a behavior that is inappropriate intervene, don't wait for someone else to address it.
- Don't use alcohol or drugs in places where they can endanger people. (These have been historical problems).
- Don't use acronyms: It can make people to feel left out.

## Health and Safety

As a volunteer with Common Ground, you may be exposed to hazardous conditions as we continue to clean out some of the most damaged and polluted

parts of the city. We need volunteers to stay as healthy as possible to insure the work can be done. Read and follow these guidelines to minimize the threat to your health, and the health of those around you.

### Keeping Safe:

- Wash your hands thoroughly and often. Use antibacterial soap and scrub for 30 seconds before you eat and after using the bathroom. Please use the instant hand-sanitizer as well, especially when working in or around mold-affected homes. Cover your mouth when you cough, and avoid food prep areas when ill. Wash your hands before smoking, especially at worksites!
- Equally important as physical health is mental health. You will be experiencing many challenging situations that you may have never experienced before. Please know that people are available to talk with you and help you process difficult and traumatic experiences. Massage, acupuncture, energy work, and counseling are available through the clinics, and many volunteers practice yoga, and other stress-relieving exercise. Whatever your needs are, just ask.
- Please be aware of your personal health. Take vitamins, drink lots of water, don't skip meals, and do get enough rest. Showers are provided at the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward Community Center site, and laundry mats are open at select locations in the area.
- Shots: The Algiers and soon to be open St. Claude clinics provides inoculation shots for tetanus, flu and hepatitis A and B.
- Be careful when driving! Signs are still down and the city's grid of one-way streets can be confusing and frustrating. Watch out at all intersections, obey stop signs (the cops are watching), don't drive after drinking (take bikes...it's a nice ride), and avoid letting unlicensed, uninsured, or inexperienced drivers behind the wheel. Also, beware of hazards in the road, such as missing manhole covers, construction debris, nails, and so on. It is handy to keep a can of fix-a-flat in your trunk!

- Be aware of your surroundings. Don't wander around town on your own, familiarize yourself with the layout of the streets (BUY A MAP). If you are here on your own, get acquainted with your co-workers and make some time to see the city as a group. If you are staying here for a while, consider buying or fixing up a bicycle; the city is flat and very bike-able (watch out for nails and potholes).

- Buddy System – don't travel around alone, Please don't wander neighborhood streets at night, even in groups.. Crime is increasing in New Orleans. Be careful and aware at all times, and watch out for each other.

- Don't leave tools and equipment at work sites! All equipment must be returned to the Community Center after the workday. We cannot loan out tools from work crews; Common Ground operates a Tool Lending Library, which residents can use.

- If you are using any power tools, chainsaws, generators, power washers, *please make sure you are properly trained.*

- When cleaning out homes, make sure that refrigerators are securely taped closed. If any liquids come out, especially meat juice, please wash it off immediately.

- Get help lifting heavy things!

- If you have asthma or allergies or breathing problems it is best to not go in moldy houses, or to keep your exposure minimal.

- Don't leave your worksite area without checking in.

#### **Pay Attention to:**



**Toxic conditions** – Floodwaters, household cleaning products, lead paints, asbestos and other hazardous materials may be found in the buildings we are working in. When doing house gutting in flood-damaged homes, wear sturdy shoes, rubber boot covers, goggles, a protective suit,

rubber gloves and a respirator mask. When returning to the Community Center, be sure to wash boots and gloves thoroughly with bleach and decontaminate equipment BEFORE entering the building or main courtyard. Make sure respirators and other sensitive equipment are properly cleaned and ready for re-use.

**Infections** - If you are cut while working, clean it thoroughly with antiseptic and cover it immediately. Keep it clean. Be careful moving refrigerators, and avoid contact with rotting food. DO NOT TOUCH ANY BLOOD, e.g., raw meat, etc. Even mosquito bites can become badly infected if scratched too much.

**Dehydration/exhaustion** - Drink lots of water! Take breaks if you feel overheated and drink water BEFORE you feel thirsty. Let someone know if you feel queasy or headache-y. These can be signs of dehydration and heat stroke or sensitivity to mold. Allow yourself a good night's sleep—rest is critical to staying healthy.

Keep in mind that we are living in very tight quarters with many other people. The work can be stressful and hazardous, so we must all take care of ourselves and look out for one another. See someone at the health station if you feel you're coming down with something.

**Snakes, spiders and more** – with the summer heat and tall grasses, more and more critters are around. Be careful when working in piles of debris

## **Sexual Harassment Prevention**

Common Ground believes that all people have a right to be free of any form of harassment and oppression, and in particular, sexual harassment. No volunteer is to threaten or insinuate, either explicitly or implicitly, that another volunteer or community members' refusal or willingness to submit to sexual advances will affect their participation in Common Ground.

All sexual contact between volunteers/community members be consented to prior to contact.

Other sexually harassing or offensive conduct is not welcome at Common Ground.

This conduct may includes:

- Unwanted physical contact or conduct of any kind, including sexual flirtations, touching, advances, or propositions;
- Verbal harassment of a sexual nature, such as lewd comments, sexual jokes or references, and offensive personal references;
- Demeaning, insulting, intimidating, or sexually suggestive comments about an individual's personal appearance;
- The display of demeaning, insulting, intimidating or sexually suggestive objects, pictures or photographs;
- Demeaning, insulting, intimidating, or sexually suggestive written, recorded, or electronically transmitted messages

Anyone who believes that another persons' actions or words constitute unwelcome harassment, should address that person directly as well as let one of the coordinators know as soon as possible. All complaints of harassment will be investigated promptly and in as impartial and confidential a manner as possible. Volunteers are asked to cooperate in any investigation. A timely resolution of each complaint should be reached and communicated to the parties involved. Common Ground treats false accusations, which can be incredibly destruction, equally seriously.

Any volunteer who is found to have violated the harassment policy may be asked to leave. Proven sexual assault may be subject to legal action.



## Dealing with the N.O.P.D.

The New Orleans Police Department has a shameful history of abuse towards residents, particularly African Americans. During

and after the hurricane, their racist polices and practices have continued. There have been unjust arrests and beatings and in early January, volunteers witnessed the police shooting and killing of a mentally ill man.

Because police must live in the Ward in which they serve, the Police in the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward saw their families left to die and the lack of government support since. Many police officers lost their homes and possessions in the storms, and several have approached Common Ground for supplies and assistance in cleaning up and restoring their houses.

Common Ground has established good working relationships with certain officers and commanders. It is important that we maintain these relationships for ourselves, as well as for the residents who will live here again when we all have moved on. Police may not like everything Common Ground stands for, but they understand that we are here to help the community and our problems with them have been minimal offenses.

This is not true for other areas of the city. Volunteers have been detained and arrested for double parking and public urination. They have also been arrested for documenting police action.

If the police confront you or others, these guidelines may help:

- If the police approach you we recommend you identify yourself as a Common Ground Relief worker. You can ask if you are being detained and if not you can move on your way. NOLA police will not hesitate to lock you up if you challenge their authority.
- Remain as calm and controlled as possible in the situation. Don't allow your anger to control your actions or words. A respectful approach can help de-escalate the situation.
- Always keep your hands where the police can see them. If you want to get your wallet or ID tell the police what you are doing and where it is. "I am getting my wallet out of my back left pocket."
- If being detained, cops can only search/frisk you to see if you have weapons, however if they feel something illegal (drug vial, etc.) it

can be held against you.

- If you are approached by the police, or see others who have been stopped, please document what happens from a safe distance – date, time, place, incident etc. and give that to the legal collective.
- NOLA has laws against public intoxication and open containers. The only legal container is a plastic cup. You will spend at a minimum of twelve hours in jail and will probably have to pay a \$300 fine for each offense. Jail and fines are not fun.
- If you are arrested, it is advisable to give the police your name and address. Contact someone as soon as possible to let him or her know you are in jail. You will go before a judge within 48 hours for a bond hearing. You may be released on your own reconnaissance or bond may be set as high as \$5000. Once bond is set, you may be released if you are able to post bond.

*A final word about the police.* Public intoxication and public urination are against the law, and you can be arrested for these actions (among many others). Use common sense when in the community, don't jeopardize your freedom, and don't disrespect these peoples' home, by foolishly doing illegal things.

If police question you about Common Ground, feel free to tell them what you are doing, house gutting etc, but if they want more information please refer them to Soleil at 504-717-7324.

## Dealing With the Media

Common Ground has attracted a lot of media attention, so it is not uncommon for media and documentary crews to show up at worksites. If the media has lots of questions about Common Ground we ask that you refer them to one of our media



spokespeople. You are free to give an interview, but please do it as an individual/volunteer but not as an official spokesperson of the organization.

Some of the messages we stress are that Common Ground is here to offer hope and teach civic responsibility. We make it clear that we are here to do relief work: providing food, water and supplies and offering home gutting and medical services. We are here in solidarity not to provide charity. We believe that residents have the right to return and that they must have a voice in the decisions about the future of their community and city. Media contacts can be referred to Sakura Kone, Kerul Dyer and Lisa Fithian. Their numbers can be found in this handbook on page 15.

## Common Ground Current Projects

### Distribution of food and supplies:

There are still areas without stores or utilities. Common Ground is working to ensure that residents have the basic provisions they need to return and remain in their community. Distribution sites are in the upper and lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward, Dulac, and New Orleans East. Main Distribution number is 504-913-5634.



### Emergency Home Repair:

Ensuring access to housing remains a critical need, and volunteers are working every day to assist residents in making their damaged homes livable and safe to occupy.

Ongoing work includes roof tarping, debris removal, tree trimming and removal, house cleaning, gutting and mold abatement. Common Ground's focus is on assisting elderly, homebound individuals and uninsured homeowners and those not being served by FEMA and official relief efforts. This vital work will continue. Contact: 504-312-1729.

### Free Medical Clinics:

A free community-controlled primary care health clinic is located at 1400 Teche Street in Algiers. A new clinic will soon be opening in the Lower 9<sup>th</sup>

Ward at 5228 St. Claude. Clinic volunteers help residents with home visits and run a Latino Health Care Outreach Project. The clinic can treat a range of health problems, including hypertension, stress, diabetes, heart problems, minor trauma, etc. It also provides treatment for respiratory illness and infections related to exposure to toxins from the flood. The clinic also provides some vaccinations, regular medical check ups, prescriptions and medications, mental health services, and alternative healing treatments such as herbal medications, massage, and acupuncture. The clinic in Algiers can be reached at 504-717-7329.

#### **Legal Support and Eviction Defense Work:**

There have been hundreds of incidents of police brutality and abuse since the hurricanes hit the gulf. Hundreds of African Americans have been harassed, arrested, and detained for minor offenses, under questionable conditions. Common Ground has a working group that is focused on police accountability and provides documentation and legal support. We organize Legal Clinics every Saturday from Noon to 3:00 pm and support litigation to prevent unjust actions by landlords and government agencies.

Another major legal issue is eviction defense. Landlords are unfairly raising rents, and evictions are happening at an alarming rate as low-income residents in undamaged homes are being moved out to make way for wealthier tenants. Common Ground connects affected tenants with legal support, monitors incidents of evictions, and works with tenant advocates and organizers working on these issues.

Common Ground help found a larger coalition called NOHEAT (New Orleans Housing Emergency Action Team) and the United Housing Front is working to ensure the right to return of public housing residents. There are thousands of units of public housing available yet resident efforts to clean them are being thwarted. Now the City and the housing Authority have announced their intention to demolish at least four housing complexes. The fight for public housing will continue for a long time. Call Soleil at 504-717-7324. For Eviction Defense Hotline: 504-883-8225

Common Ground operates a free drop-in wireless computer lab at the media center known as the House of Excellence, at 1415 Franklin Ave., in the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward at 1700 Deslonde and in Algiers and has operated mobile computer labs in New Orleans area as needed. Mesh Wireless Network is setting up a free wireless service for the entire Algiers area. Common Ground produces and distributes a range of vital information to residents and provides assistance in filling out FEMA applications, insurance forms and other paperwork. Common Ground is also in the process of developing a community newspaper called *“Breaking Ground”* and the Post-Katrina Portraits, an art and story documentary. Contact number for the House of Excellence 504-947-0270, for Tech info call Ben at 718-247-4371.

#### **Women's Center**

This Center was opened in late November to provide a safe place for women. The Women's Center encourages women to actively participate by initiating new programs, volunteering, or by taking advantage of the programs that are already in place. Current programs include housing accommodation for women and young children. The center has offer women medical resources or referrals for basic clinical health care, self defense workshops, basic electrical home maintenance, and crisis counseling. The dormitory can house 18 women and children for short term or transition periods, while their homes are rehabilitated and jobs are secured. The Women Center is working with Dress for Success to insure that the women have the clothes they need to succeed. Common Ground is committed to providing a safe and empowering place for women, as part of an overall goal towards restoration of the Gulf region. Contact Donna at 504-717-5536



### **Common Ground Kids and Community Project:**

The lack of functional schools is one of the major factors when evacuated families decide whether or not to return. Currently there are an inadequate number of schools open in New Orleans. But empty schools are only part of the problem. Even before the storm, schools were notoriously under-funded and under-equipped. Common Ground is working with young people in after school and summer programs. We provide tutoring and a Youth Leadership Institute. At the Woodland Apartments we are offering a summer athletics program. Common Ground is also supporting a summer program at Mt. Carmel Baptist Church in the Upper 9<sup>th</sup> Ward. In addition work crews are working over the summer to clean out area schools to insure that more are able to open by the fall of 2006. Contact: 501-717-5255

### **Common Tree Services**

One of our volunteers, Topher, an arborist from Alaska, was instrumental in damaged tree removal in the weeks after the hurricane. Topher has now formed a company, all locally employed to continue this work. 25% of the proceeds benefit Common Ground, and one day a week is still dedicated to volunteer efforts. Contact Topher: 504-909-7732.



### **Emergency Preparedness**

Common Ground has begun planning for this hurricane season. In addition to working with our volunteers on plans to secure our sites and evacuate. We are also storing provisions on high ground and supporting some of our organizers in getting disaster relief training. Contact: Lori, at 504-722-0422.

### **Environmental Monitoring/Bio-remediation:**

Common Ground recruited skilled volunteers to do water/soil sampling with \$10,000 of donated analysis. CGC has help to coordinate sharing of this data with government health organizations, distribute pertinent information to the public on potential hazards and develop bioremediation efforts for the soil. We developed a brochure called ***“Water, Mud, Mold and More, Staying Safe When Returning to Coastal Louisiana.”*** A slideshow on toxic hazards has also been produced and informative wall displays as well. In November and February we hosted trainings for local residents and volunteers in bioremediation. We have currently treated 14 sites in Gert Town, the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward and Upper and Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Wards. Contact: Emily at 504-913-5635.

### **Wetlands Protection**

The wetlands are the regions best defense against flooding, yet oil interests continue to carve away channels, flooding the wetlands with salt water that is killing the vegetation. The solutions for restoration exist, but the government nor the oil industry are willing to allocated the money to restore this area that protects New Orleans. Our efforts include research, education and action to prevent the ongoing destruction of the wetlands while supporting restoration efforts. Contact Justin at 760-680-1660 or Jess at 609-462-3854.

**Workers Cooperatives** are getting underway with plans for a training program and jobs primarily at the Woodland Apartments in Algiers.

## *Meg Perry Community Garden and Bioremediation Project*

Meg Perry, one of our volunteers who was helping to organize the garden, was tragically killed in an accident on December 10, 2005. Meg was an amazing organizer who dedicated her life to spreading the word about environmental issues facing our nation. Her bus, known as the Frida Bus, ran on vegetable oil. A memorial service was held at the garden and her family planted a fig tree in her honor. Common Ground will continue this vital work in Meg's name. May her memory sustain us, and feed the beautiful greens planted with her hands.



Working with Parkway Partners, Common Ground has also cleaned numerous community gardens in the New Orleans area. Sun Done Organics Garden in Gentilly, has been made available to Common Ground for growing food implementing our bioremediation project. Using worm compost tea, oyster mushrooms and greens, the bioremediation project will be focused on cleaning up contaminated areas in New Orleans. The project has been named after Meg to honor her work for a healthy, sustainable future.

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## Important Phone Numbers

<b>Malik's House</b>	504-368-6897	
<b>Sakura Kone</b>	917-440-9679	Coordinator Special Events, Media, Scheduling
<b>Shakoor Alljuwani</b>	434-806-9111	Coordinator
<b>Lisa Fithian</b>	213-840-1972	Coordinator
<b>Kerul Dyer</b>	504-339-5885	Coordinator
<b>Don Paul</b>	504-312-1725	Coordinator
<b>Sean White</b> <b>Michelle Shin</b>	504-717-5633 973-930-9879 415-794-7507	9 <sup>th</sup> Ward Coordinator  L9th Ward Coordinator
<b>Suncere</b>	504-913-8693 985-791-7001	Dulac Coordinator
<b>Jeremiah</b>	617-686-0941	Mid City Coordinator
<b>House of Excellence</b>	504-947-0270	1415 Franklin St.
<b>St. Mary of the Angels</b>	504-235-1759	2225 Congress
<b>Iberville Warehouse</b>	504-235-1729	2323 Iberville St
<b>Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward</b>	504-312-1731	1700 Deslonde

<b>Legal</b>	504-717-7324	Soliel
<b>Security</b>	504-218-6614	
<b>Algiers Clinic</b>	504-361-9800	1400 Teche
<b>Bioremediation</b>	504-913-5635	Emily
<b>Distro</b>	504-913-9691	
<b>Kids and Community</b>	504-717-5255	Tyler
<b>Mt. Carmel Community Center</b>	504-717-5129	
<b>Eviction Hotline</b>	504-883-8225	
<b>Tech Support</b>	718-247-4371	Ben
<b>Volunteers</b>	504-218-6613	Emily
<b>Wetlands</b>	609-462-3854 760-680-1660	Jess Justin
<b>Women's Center</b>	504-717-5536	Donna
<b>Work Crews</b>	504-913-5635	Luke and Andy